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As a teenager in the middle 1980s, Mark Rodriguez sold drugs for a Latin street gang in Chicago.

His life changed in 1986 when his best friend was murdered by an opposing gang member.

"I'm just one of the lucky ones who survived," said Rodriguez of Gurnee, now a respected businessman and father who works with law enforcement to discourage youth from getting involved in gangs.

Rodriguez spoke at a meeting Monday attended by more 150 local law enforcement officials to discuss the growing infiltration of drug gangs in the suburbs.

The anti-gang meeting was hosted by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th of Highland Park, and included representatives from the U.S. Attorney's Office, FBI, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and the Lake County Metropolitan Enforcement Group, which investigates gangs and drugs in the county.

"We have to work with federal law enforcement agencies to make sure there's no safe place for gangs," said Kirk.

He said last week the House of Representatives approved \$100 million in proposed new funding to help communities fight gangs.

Mark Prosperri, chief of the U.S. Attorney's Narcotics and Gang Division, said street gangs now extend well beyond the city of Chicago into the northern and southern suburbs.

"They're looking for new avenues," he said. "They're looking for someplace they can be successful and make money."

The Lake County Metropolitan Enforcement Group estimates that more than 3,000 gang members are operating north of Lake Cook Road. Many of these gangs are not only involved in selling drugs, but also in other types of criminal activity such as burglaries, drive-by shootings, thefts and car thefts, said Mark Rasmussen, the agency's director.

While most of the gang members live in the Waukegan and North Chicago area, Kirk said other county communities such as Mundelein, Round Lake Beach and even Highwood report gang activity.

Rasmussen said in March a member of the Latin Kings gang was arrested after a traffic stop in Mundelein and a search of his residence uncovered a substantial quantity of illegal drugs. Last summer in Deerfield, a member of an Asian street gang from Chicago was arrested in an undercover sting after he attempted to sell 5,000 pills of Ecstasy, he said.

Even affluent Cook County communities like Palatine have seen signs of new gang activity such as gang graffiti.

"It's not isolated. It's not just in Palatine. It's everywhere," said Palatine Mayor Rita Mullins.

Rodriguez said more intervention programs are needed to prevent at-risk youth from becoming involved in gangs.